

Conference reports

International Conference on “Foresight Studies on Work in the Knowledge Society” in Monte de Caparica (FCT-UNL) on 19-20 October 2006

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On 19 and 20 October 2006, the Research Centre on Enterprise and Work Organisation (IET) organised the first international conference on “Foresight Studies on Work in the Knowledge Society”. It took place at the auditorium of the new Library of FCT-UNL and had the support of the research project “CodeWork@VO” (financed by FCT-MCTES and co-ordinated by INESC, Porto). The conference related to the European research project “Work Organisation and Restructuring in the Knowledge Society” (WORKS), which is financed by the European Commission. The main objective of the conference was to analyse and discuss research findings on the trends of work structures in the knowledge society, and to debate on new work organisation models and new forms of work supported by ICT. The conference was opened with brief greetings from António B. Moniz, Director of IET, and António Lucas Soares, representing INESC Porto, as well as Jorge Lampreia, representing the Director of FCT-UNL.

In a first position paper, Bettina-Johanna Krings (ITAS – Institute for Technology Assessment and Systems Analysis, Forschungszentrum Karlsruhe, Germany) concentrated on societal changes in modern societies. She presented the central discourse of the knowledge-based society and emphasised that the revision of the assumptions of a knowledge-based society shows that the current change processes in society can not be considered as the results of a profound societal paradigm shift. Rather, the change should be described as a normative and virtual shift towards a concept, which strongly focuses on the role of technology and the global economic markets as driving forces.

In a second position paper, António Lucas Soares (INESC – Instituto de Engenharia de Sistemas e Computadores, Porto) dealt with the integration of technical and organisational processes. He emphasised that a new category of methodological tools supported by modern knowledge management technologies is needed in order to make complex development processes feasible. Soares summarised several research projects dealing with multidisciplinary approaches to integrate collaboration and information management.

The presentation of António B. Moniz (IET) focused on foresight and scenario building methods. He presented different methods with the aim to understand changes in the labour process. Finally, he sketched some reflections in order to organise a set of principles for foresight analysis in the European research project WORKS. This presentation was followed by José Sampaio (also from IET) that concentrated himself on foresight perspectives of

professional competences in complex working systems. He presented the case of the Portuguese air traffic control services and argued that the knowledge society promotes the development of complex work systems. Furthermore, he emphasised that the solution of complex problems requires the development of a systemic and integrative model of professional competencies, either at the human subsystem level or at the technical subsystem level.

Cristóvão Sousa (INESC – Instituto de Engenharia de Sistemas e Computadores, Porto) presented a paper that was focused on a construction of work organisation ontologies. He analysed the way in which such an ontology was developed in terms of concepts, knowledge representation and knowledge sources. The talk of Luis Ribeiro (UNINOVA) and José Barata (FCT-UNL) dealt with similar topics, specifically with the new shop floor control approaches for virtual enterprises. They explained that the new dynamic environment of virtual enterprises requires that partners in the consortium own reconfigurable shop floors.

The paper of Tobias Woll (IET) dealt with the change processes and future prospects in the knowledge society. The clothing and textile industries was presented as an example for a transforming manufacturing sector. The presentation highlighted results from existing European organisation surveys and foresight studies. On that basis, he outlined major trends, drivers of change and future prospects in this industrial sector. The next speaker, Martin Bechmann (ITAS – Institute for Technology Assessment and Systems Analysis, Forschungszentrum Karlsruhe, Germany) concentrated on the concept of knowledge work. He emphasised that this term implies some methodological problems. He argued that it remains unclear who exactly is doing knowledge work and how attributes commonly linked to knowledge work apply to knowledge workers. In a first step, he proposed a systematic approach of varying forms of knowledge work. In a second step, findings from an empirical study on knowledge workers in the IT-sector were presented.

Isabel Lopes Nunes (DEMI, FCT-UNL) spoke about ergonomics and usability as key factors in the knowledge society. She explained that the shift from an industrial society to a knowledge society introduced also technological, organisational, and methodological changes. Due to this fact ergonomics, as well as usability, are becoming more and more important. In a knowledge society where computer-based information systems (IS) play a crucial role, it is necessary to make design, tasks, jobs and products compatible with the needs, abilities and limitations of people and users.

Finally, the presentations of representatives of two Portuguese companies gave inputs to the conference from another context. Sérgio Paulo of ROCA (Leira) and António Chora of AutoEuropa (Palmela) talked about their experiences with new work organisation concepts in the ceramic and automotive industry. The first one presented results from an advanced experience of development of a robotic assembly line with specific design of software interfaces to support increased participation of workers in the decision process, and the second one, as leader of the Workers Committee, presented the on-going steps of innovation process in the VW plant in Portugal, where the negotiations enabled the possibility of implementation of new projects with further technological complexity based on workgroup concept.

This international conference of IET followed the experience of another one held in 2005, but this thematic is intended to be followed in further conferences with the support of IFIP – International Federation of Information Processing and APDSI, the Portuguese Association for the Development of Information Society.